XXXI

FROM SHARJAH TO BAGHDAD

We were early astir the next morning, and before the sun had made its appearance over the horizon, we were heading out to sea on the next stage of the journey *en route* for Bahrein, a distance of 335 miles. With the exception of a number of small, uninhabited islands, the whole of the distance is covered out of sight of land, only a few fishing boats plying their craft being the only sign of life in this region. Bahrein is situated on the smaller of two islands on the west coast of the Persian Gulf and is used chiefly as a fuelling station, and alighting there for a short stay of twenty-five minutes to allow for filling up of the petrol tanks, the passengers passed the time examining the pearls offered for sale by the itinerant vendors who depend on their living on the purchases by air travellers on the outward and inward journeys. Our next hop was some 265 miles before reaching Koweit, a walled city on the Arabian coast. We were favoured by a strong following wind as we skirted the coast the whole way, and such was the force of the wind that barely two hours after leaving Bahrein we were circling over the town and harbour of Koweit preparing to land. But it was not to be, for we were favoured by one of the frequent sand storms which periodically sweep over Arabia, and almost without warning a rushing wind and sudden darkness wiped out every landmark, and we were sweeping over the desert at a speed of no less than 175 miles per hour, flying blindly

at 2,000 feet without the remotest possibility of landing the mails we had brought with us. It was for all the world like a ship driving before a storm, and is certainly an experience I have never had before, as we swept onward to Basra, our next port of call. In a few minutes we had cleared the sandstorm, and within half an hour had traversed the seventy-five miles necessary to reach Basra, and to the surprise of the attendants of the aerodrome arriving so much before our scheduled time we were taxi-ing along the sands, hungry for lunch, which was supposed to be awaiting our arrival. Hurry and bustle was now the order of the day, the mails intended for Koweit were to be returned by the next available train, and the passengers made tracks for the wash basins to deal with the sand which had invaded ears, nose, mouth and hair, and never was a lavatory more appreciated than on this memorable occasion. Our toilets completed, we adjourned to the dining-room, and waited the arrival of lunch. Alas for our hopes, just as everything was ready, a second sandstorm suddenly burst upon us, and in a twinkling a mighty rushing wind—reminding me of the description of the day of Pentecost—was upon us. It filled every nook and cranny with a dark deposit of sand; it came through every crack and aperture, even between the putty and glass of the windows, and for over an hour it swirled and shrieked about us, as under the illumination of the electric lights which fortunately did not fail us, we gazed outside at the darkness, and listened to the howling of the wind. What of our plane? This fortunately had been attended to. At the first warning of the storm, the plane had been lashed firmly down to stakes driven in the ground after being drawn as far as possible in the shelter of the buildings, failing which it would

have inevitably been ruined beyond repair. However, everything comes to an end, and so did the sandstorm, but the lunch. Oh dear, never again shall I choose sand as one of the courses. It was everywhere, the grit in our teeth came from the soup, the fish, the joint, the pudding, and even the rolls of bread. My hair and eyes once more filled, and a second journey to the wash basin only disclosed sand in the water, in the soap and, of course, all over the towel. I did all I could, and welcomed at last the announcement that the storm had abated and we once again entered the plane to complete the last lap of the day's journey to Baghdad. We emerged from the rest house and found the plane being towed by a caterpillar tractor to some little distance from the hangar, as a stiff breeze was still blowing and it was thought prudent to allow more room in case of the wind driving the plane out of its course, which meant the passengers walking a few hundred yards to where the plane was to make its ascent. All aboard at last and away we went, but no sooner had we left the ground than a fierce blast sent the plane careering along at a dangerous angle unable to right itself for the moment owing to the terrible pressure, but at last an even keel was obtained, and with a sweep we rushed northward at no less than 160 miles per hour, the wind blowing a gale as it drove us onward. Baghdad is 280 miles from Basra, but with the following wind we expected to make up most of the time lost at Basra, and so it turned out, for we followed the sandstorm nearly all the way although it lessened in volume as we moved further north. Visibility, however, was extremely poor, and with the exception of numerous Bedouin encampments, whose large black tents could be seen spread out in the desert, surrounded by vast flocks of sheep, little more

could be seen. Even the course of the Tigris was not visible nor the Arch of Ctesipon, one of the landmarks of the desert. Half an hour before we expected to arrive, we alighted on the magnificent aerodrome on the outskirts of Baghdad, and as soon as possible revelling in the luxury of a hot bath, in which I said good-bye to the desert sand which for the last six hours had made life unbearable. The rest house at the Baghdad aerodrome is excellently fitted up, and I needed little persuasion to stay there for the night instead of going into the city where mosquitoes made themselves very familiar with strangers unless protected by a mosquito net to guard against their depredations.

XXXII

FROM BAGHDAD TO CAIRO

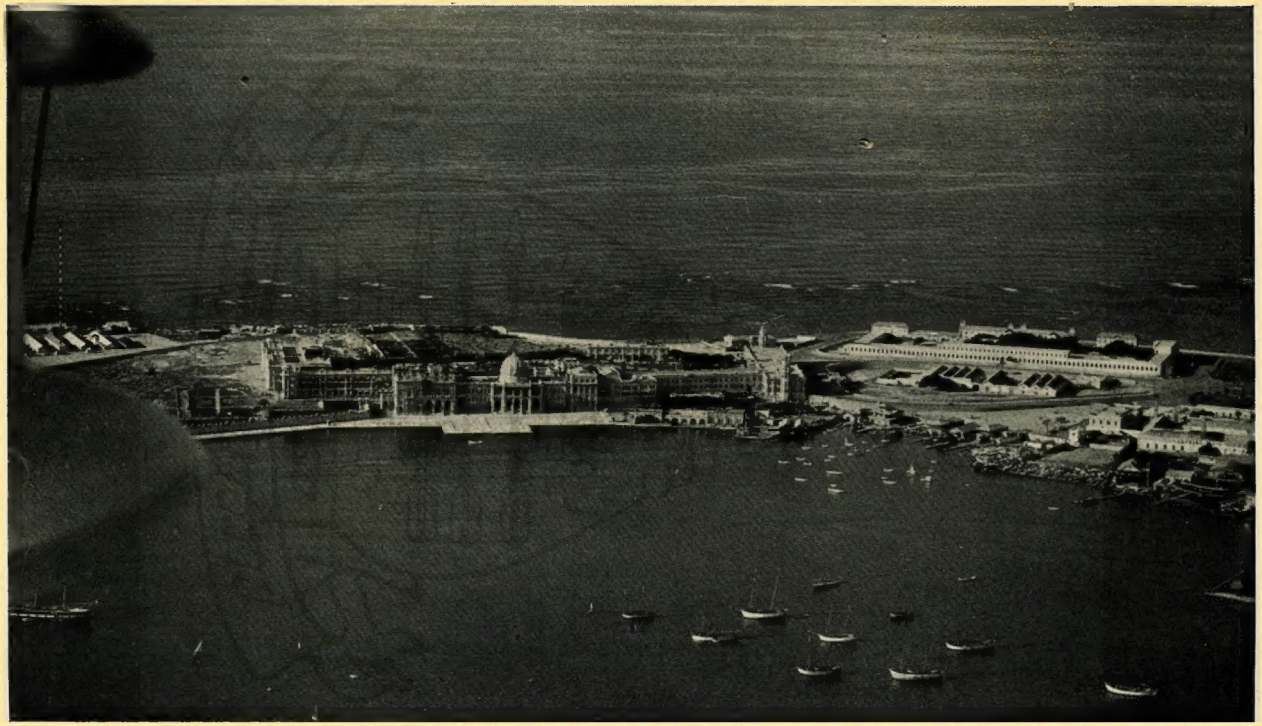
We were allowed a little longer time in bed next morning as nine o'clock was the time fixed for starting, and right on time the propellers were set in motion, and we were traversing the country which lies between the two famous rivers of Holy Writ, the Tigris and Euphrates. After reaching an altitude of 5,000 feet both rivers were to be seen simultaneously, and their windings could be distinctly traced as they found their way to Basra, until lost to view in the mists of the desert. An uneventful run of three hours brought us to the Fort at Rutbah Wells, at which place refuelling of the petrol tanks took place, the passengers utilizing the time in lunching inside the fort. At one o'clock we were on our way again across the desert, and we had a good view of the new oil pipe line, which runs from Kirkuk to the Palestine coast, which was now on the way to completion. The pipe line for many miles runs parallel to the Caravan route across the Syrian desert, but now the configuration of the country underwent a change, black basalt stretching as far as could be seen, without a vestige of vegetation, and except for the presence of the telegraph posts, it looked as if untrodden by the foot of man since the creation. But another startling change in the country occurred as we neared the mountains of Moab, which skirt the eastern coast of the Dead Sea. In the place of the black basalt were to be seen low circular mounds of light coloured rocks,

layer upon layer, resembling more than anything else oyster shells spread over the surface of the land, and between the mounds there were cultivated fields of brown earth, with occasionally a patch of bright green, where the land had been cultivated, which formed a welcome change from the terrible wilderness of the desolate country which we had left behind us. And now as we cross the Mountains of Moab, the Dead Sea, with the long valley of the River Jordan looming into view, and sweeping over the foothills of the mountains we steer straight ahead for the northern portion of the Dead Sea, just below the point where the Jordan empties its waters, and in the neighbourhood where the recently opened potash and salt refineries which cover an area of no less than 200 acres, which developments have indeed brought life to the Dead Sea. It may be of interest to give some particulars of what is happening in this region. As is of course well known the waters of the Dead Sea contain so much salt that no fish can exist in it. The percentage of mineral salts in the ocean does not exceed 3½ per cent, while the waters here contain no less than 25 per cent. The salt content gives such amazing buoyancy that it is impossible for a human body to sink, and its clearness is phenomenal.

It is estimated that the salts in solution contain approximately 2,000,000,000 (two thousand million) tons of potassium chloride, 12 thousand million tons of sodium chloride, 22 thousand million tons of magnesium chloride, 6,000 million tons of calcium chloride, and a thousand million tons of magnesium bromide. Its value has been computed as follows: potash 70 million dollars, bromine 260 million dollars, gypsum 70 million dollars, calcium chloride 85 thousand dollars, magnesium 825 thousand million dollars. Here are located

the giant evaporators, the salt refineries, the power stations, pumps and workers dwellings, capable of sheltering 500 workmen with their families. The salt water is pumped into the great evaporating pans through tubes laid to a depth of 165 feet beneath the surface of the water, at the rate of 36,000 litres a minute. At the present time the company is producing fertiliser and bromine for use on the manufacture of dyes and drugs. There is an output of about 200 tons of these valuable chemicals per week. They are taken by truck to Jerusalem, and there loaded into freight cars for transportation to foreign countries. Under the terms of the concession the company possesses the right to abstract a total of 100,000 tons annually of the various salts from the waters of the sea. But we are now midway across the water, when without warning the plane suddenly wheels round and turns back on her course, the reason for which is explained by the attendant. It appears for the last two hours we have encountered strong head winds, and necessitated thereby a heavy demand on our petrol supply, so we are now retracing our steps to a spot on the hills where is kept a large storage tank of petrol in case it is required, and in a short time we have alighted on some high ground near the storage tank, and the pump is refilling our tanks sufficiently to carry us to our next stopping place, Gaza. The tanks filled we rise again and now fly towards the Galilean mountains, leaving the historical town of Jericho, now a mere village, amongst its vineyards a little distance from the Jordan, while away to the north-east lies the city of Jerusalem the various buildings lit up by the setting sun as we journey south, and catching also a fleeting vision of the town of Bethlehem, nestling on the hill side a few miles due south of the city of David. Just

as the sun slowly disappeared behind the Mediterranean, we alighted at Gaza, the scene of Samson's exploits, where it will be remembered he carried off the gates of the town, and his tomb may still be seen in the vicinity. After replenishing our tanks once more, and darkness having fallen, we commence the last stage of our journey to Cairo, and until nearing the city nothing was of course visible. But as we neared the Suez Canal, strings of lights came into view covering a vast area, and in order to give the passengers the best view of Ismalia and the city, the lights of the plane were extinguished, enabling us to have an excellent view of the waterway and Ismalia also, as we passed directly overhead, and then shortly after 9 o'clock the lights of Cairo were to be seen in the distance, and an excellent landing brought a most interesting day's flight to a close. We had landed at Heliopolis aerodrome, and after the usual Customs formalities we were driven to Shepheard's Hotel, where we stayed the night.



A View of Alexandria, Egypt, showing the Government Buildings *[By courtesy of "The Times"*

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XXXIII

FROM ALEXANDRIA TO ATHENS

In a most luxuriantly appointed bathroom attached to my bedroom on the third floor of Shepheard's Hotel I revelled in the luxury of a hot bath, and was in no immediate hurry to emerge therefrom to dress for dinner, as I lay submerged, reflecting on the events of the day, and the bird's-eye views of the Syrian desert, Rutbah Wells, the lonely telegraph line as suspended from poles it stretched its way across uncharted paths towards civilization, the sombre mountains of Moab, the winding valley of the river Jordan, the village of historic Jericho nestling in an oasis of cultivated country, the bleak and desolated wilderness of barren hills which lie between Jerusalem and the Dead Sea, and Jerusalem itself, with Bethlehem a few miles to the southward as we journeyed over the Promised Land, sent the mind back 2,000 years to the world stirring events which have given a new religion to mankind. The rapid travel, this magic carpet, outrivalling the wonders of the Arabian nights, leaves one wondering at this modern miracle of flight, which but a few years ago would have been looked upon as but a dream of the impossible. A clamorous dinner gong along the corridors, however, brings my thoughts back to the trivial but imperative duties of one's toilet, and the importance of administering to the requirements of the inner man. Hurriedly dressing, I descend to the dining-room where already various fellow travellers are seated, doing full justice to a

well cooked dinner. Immediately after breakfast the following morning we boarded the hotel omnibus which conveyed us some distance down the river Nile to where the seaplane "Sylvanus" was awaiting our arrival, on which we were to traverse the hundred odd miles from Cairo to Alexandria. The moorings cast off, we taxied against the stream, the floats ploughing their way through the green water, and sending it in two streams on either side past the windows, and then we lifted, soaring over the city, and our attention directed to the Pyramids in the desert clearly discernible some miles distant as we swung round and headed northward to the Mediterranean. The journey to the coast occupying about an hour, chiefly over stretches of cultivated land, with intervals of sandy desert, and here and there, streams, partly dry, with pools of water, at intervals, and occasionally some mud villages scattered over the desert and about which donkeys laden with merchandise attended by some boy in coloured raiment slowly wended their way across the landscape. In the far distance the white houses and buildings of Alexandria appeared, and the white sails of the ships in the harbour became visible, and a few minutes later we were tilting at a steep angle as the plane swerved in its descent, and again the rushing waves were sweeping past the windows of the plane as we made a capital "landing" on the waters of the harbour of Alexandria. A launch was quickly alongside, which transferred the passengers to the shore, where for the space of perhaps half an hour, we awaited the arrival of another tender which was in attendance of another four-engined seaplane, the "Satyras," on which we were to make the crossing of the Mediterranean to Crete, and thence to Athens. During the transference of our baggage from one seaplane

ANCIENT ATHENS FROM THE AIR *[By courtesy of "The Times"*

The Parthenon in the foreground, with theatre of Dionysius to the left

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to the other, light refreshments were served, and once more we took our places and were quickly ploughing the surface of the harbour, and circling over the port, prior to setting our course for Crete, some 372 miles distant. Visibility was poor, heavy clouds overhead, with a slight drizzle, and this necessitated flying at a low altitude, no more than five hundred feet, passing close to small fishing craft, whose occupants gazed with interest at the seaplane so close overhead, and I noticed one or two crouching low in their craft as if uncertain as to whether we were not making a forced descent. Flying steadily northward for three and a half hours, the weather gradually clearing, the mountains of Crete came into view, with a corresponding rise in our flying height until we flew at an altitude of 4,000 feet, which was necessary in order to scale the high rocky peaks which we were now rapidly approaching. Selecting a break in the mountain range as the point of entry we were now flying through a valley high up amongst the hills, high peaks appearing on either side, while directly beneath our keel were to be seen pretty little villages picturesquely situated in the valleys, and narrow ribbon-like roads and paths winding their way in and out as far as the eye could see. Swerving amongst the hilltops, we kept steadily northward until at last the northern shore became visible and planing down in steep curves we descended rapidly into a little landlocked bay nearby the quaint little township of Mirabella. Here lay at anchor a small steamboat, which is utilized as a base for aircraft, to which the passengers were transferred, while the plane was towed some little distance away for the purpose of refuelling. Half an hour later a start was made, again we piled up the waves on either side of the seaplane, then rose from the bay, and still voyaging northward

made a bee line for Greece. Later many islands of the Grecian archipelago were sighted, and shortly before 5 p.m. high land on the horizon announced that we were approaching Athens, alighting gracefully in the harbour of Phaleron, a few hundred yards from the shore. A launch was quickly in attendance, and passengers and baggage conveyed to the Customs House, where after inspection a motor bus conveyed us to the city a few miles distant, where we were to stay the night. The evening was spent in visiting the various places of interest, the chief attraction being the Acropolis, on which is built the famous Parthenon. This has recently been flood lit, which makes it a very striking attraction at night, standing as it does high above the town, and which must be visible for many miles around.

XXXIV

FROM ATHENS TO PARIS

An early breakfast, and the motor bus again requisitioned, we were soon aboard the seaplane for the cross sea journey to Italy. Shortly after leaving the harbour we were flying immediately above the Corinth Canal, a splendid view being obtained also of the surrounding scenery which is very picturesque, the whole countryside being under intense cultivation, then, continuing our course, we pass many small islands, but heading slightly northward we did not sight Corfu, much to our regret, as we had been anticipating a view of this town, but now we steer direct for Italy, and save for a sharp rainstorm which came down in almost tropical intensity, nothing of note has to be chronicled until we descended into the harbour of Brindisi. Once more Customs formalities were gone through, after which a bus conveyed us to the railway station, for Imperial Airways are not yet permitted to cross Italy, although I understand negotiations are in progress. We settled ourselves down for the long railway journey of about eighteen hours to Paris. The scenery of Italy on the east coast calls for little or no comment, but everywhere the land is cultivated, hardly a square yard which is not carrying some crop, or olive trees which form no small industry throughout Italy. Night came on, and so to sleep, until we draw up to the platform at the Paris terminus and after breakfast are conveyed to Le Bourget aerodrome for the final flight to England.

XXXV

FROM PARIS TO CROYDON

THE great thirty-eight seater plane the "Hengist," with propellers slowly turning, awaits our arrival, and without loss of time, we are soon aboard, the baggage stowed away amidships, the skids removed and slowly but with ever-increasing speed the huge plane sweeps along the grass, then leaps upward and we are heading northward, leaving Paris on our left, with the Eiffel tower looming in the mist on our port side, then across the environs, crossing the river Oise and away to the English Channel on the final lap of this eventful journey to the Far East! At 5,000 feet we leap the channel, the town of Boulogne beneath us, and it seems hardly had we left the French coast, than the white cliffs of Old England appear ahead, then the green fields, small villages in the valleys, winding streams among the hills, and finally the twin towers of the Crystal Palace glistening in the morning sunshine, announces the completion of my 20,000 mile trip to the Far East. A few minutes later our landing wheels were spinning along the asphalt beneath the conning tower of Croydon Aerodrome.